

Message Text

SECRET

PAGE 01 BEIRUT 00294 251558Z
ACTION SS-25

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S E C R E T BEIRUT 0294

EXDIS

FOR THE SECRETARY FROM CHARGE

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PFOR, SY, LE, IS, US
SUBJECT: MOVEMENT OF SYRIAN FORCES TOWARD SOUTH LEBANON

REF: STATE 16150

1. CHARGE CALLED ON PRESIDENT SARKIS AT 1300 LOCAL JAN 25
AND CONVEYED TO HIM ORALLY THE SECRETARY'S MESSAGE REFTEL.
GOL PRIME MINISTER SALIM AL-HOSS WAS ALSO PRESENT, AND SARKIS
CALLED IN ASF COMMANDER COL AL-HAJJ DURING THE DISCUSSION.

2. AS SOON AS I HAD COMPLETED PRESENTATION OF SECRETARY'S
MESSAGE, SARKIS RESPONDED "BUT IT NEVER OCCURRED TO US THAT
THE JAZZIN-NABATIYAH ROUTE WOULD CAUSE ANY PROBLEM." SARKIS
AND AL-HAJJ INSISTED THAT IN OUR EARLIER DISCUSSIONS WE HAD
FOCUSED ON TWO PRINCIPAL AXES: 1) FROM SIDON TO TYRE
AND 2) FROM SIDON TO THE ZAHRANI REFINERY, SOUTHEAST
THROUGH NABATIYAH AND MARJAYUN, THEN NORTHEAST TO MASNAA.
THEY HAD PROMISED NOT TO DEPLOY ALONG THESE ROUTES
WITHOUT INFORMING US AND THEY WOULD KEEP THAT PROMISE.
BUT NABATIYAH WAS 20 KILOMETERS FROM THE ISRAELI

SECRET

SECRET

PAGE 02 BEIRUT 00294 251558Z

BORDER AND NORTH OF THE LITANI, WHICH THEY ASSUMED WAS
THE ISRAELI RED LINE. A FEW ASF TROOPS THERE COULD
HARDLY POSE A THREAT TO ISRAEL. COL AL-HAJJ INSISTED
THE MOVE SOUTH FROM JAZZIN WAS TACTICAL, NOT STRATEGIC,
DESIGNED TO REASSURE THE CHRISTIANS IN THE AREA WHO WERE
BEING HARASSED BY PALESTINIANS AND LEFTISTS. IN ASHIYA,
FOR EXAMPLE, THERE HAD BEEN A MASSACRE LAST YEAR AND THE

CHRISTIANS WERE AFRAID TO RETURN TO THEIR HOMES WITHOUT ASF PROTECTION. COL AL-HAJJ EXPLAINED IN DETAIL THAT THERE WAS ONLY ONE BATTALION STRETCHED FROM KFAR HUNI TO NABATIYAH AND NO INTENTION TO SEND ANY MORE. THESE TROOPS WERE ACTING AS POLICEMEN, NOT SOLDIERS AND WERE NO THREAT TO ISRAEL. ON THE OTHER HAND, THEIR PRESENCE MEANT THAT THE NEARBY PLO AIRFIELD COULD BE CLOSED AND THE REFUGEE CAMP KEPT UNDER SURVEILLANCE.

3. I REITERATED POINTS MADE IN SECRETARY'S MESSAGE THAT 1) WE WERE UNAWARE OF ANY NEW DEVELOPMENTS WHICH REQUIRED SUCH A CHANGE AND THAT 2) SUCH MOVEMENT SO SOON AFTER NEW ADMINISTRATION HAD TAKEN OFFICE IN WASHINGTON PUT USG IN DIFFICULT POSITION, AND ASKED FOR EXPLANATION. ON FIRST POINT, SARKIS, AL-HOSS AND AL-HAJJ ALL SAID THAT GOL HAD BEEN UNDER INCREASING PRESSURE IN RECENT WEEKS FROM BOTH PARLIAMENTARY DEPUTIES AND POPULATION OF THIS AREA TO DO SOMETHING TO RESTORE ORDER. COL AL-HAJJ SAID HE HAD RECENTLY RECEIVED ADDITIONAL TROOPS AND INDICATED THAT DEPLOYMENT SOUTH FROM JAZZIN WAS PART OF A PACKAGE THAT INCLUDED OCCUPATION OF THE SHUF (WHICH TOOK PLACE JAN 9) AND INCREASED ASF PRESENCE IN EAST BEIRUT (SEE BEIRUT 273). PRIMIN AL-HOSS SAID USG MUST WEIGH GREAT BENEFIT TO LEBANON OF HAVING A FEW SOLDIERS IN THIS PREVIOUSLY LAWLESS AREA AGAINST NON-EXISTENT THREAT TO ISRAEL. ON SECOND POINT, ALL THREE SEEMED GENUINELY NON-PLUSSED AT SUGGESTION THAT THERE WAS SOME CONNECTION BETWEEN TIMING OF THIS MOVEMENT AND BEGINNING OF NEW US

SECRET

SECRET

PAGE 03 BEIRUT 00294 251558Z

ADMINISTRATION. I DO NOT BELIEVE THIS HAD OCCURRED TO THEM. I REITERATED THAT ISRAELIS HAD INFORMED US OF THEIR GRAVE CONCERN AND THAT WE THEREFORE TOOK THIS MOVE VERY SERIOUSLY. SARKIS AND AL-HAJJ REITERATED THAT JAZZIN-NABATIYAH MOVE WAS NOT COVERED BY THEIR COMMITMENT TO KEEP US INFORMED AND PROMISED THEY WOULD NOT REPEAT NOT AUTHORIZE ANY MOVEMENT TO TYRE OR MARJAYUN WITHOUT ADVISING US IN ADVANCE.

4. COMMENT: SARKIS' AND AL-HAJJ'S ASSERTION THAT THEY DID NOT BELIEVE A JAZZIN-NABATIYAH MOVEMENT WAS COVERED BY THEIR PROMISE TO KEEP US INFORMED MAY APPEAR SOMEWHAT DISENGENOUS, BUT THERE IS EVIDENCE THAT WAS HONEST CONFUSION ON THIS POINT. IN OUR PREVIOUS DISCUSSIONS (SEE, FOR EXAMPLE, PARA 5 OF BEIRUT 8652, NOV 29, 1976), WE FOCUSED ON ASF MOVEMENTS SOUTH AND EAST FROM SIDON TO TYRE AND MARJAYUN. PARA 5, BEIRUT 8827 ALSO SUGGESTS SARKIS MAY HAVE BELIEVED

HE HAD A FREE HAND NORTH AND WEST OF THE LITANI.

5. AT NO TIME DURING THE DISCUSSION DID EITHER SARKIS
OR AL-HAJJ SUGGEST THAT SYRIA WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS
LATEST MOVEMENT OF ASF TROOPS.

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